



Celebrating Life and Death Together

Pastoral Notes

and

Interim Guidelines for Parish Funeral Ministry
in the Diocese of Maitland–Newcastle

The death of a Christian is a significant event in the life of the community. Sometimes the loss and grief is accompanied by thanksgiving and hope. At other times, the Funeral Rites are occasions of thanksgiving and hope, deep lament and heart-rending questions.

Ministering during the whole life experience of death is one of the most important and difficult aspects of pastoral care and liturgical service. Increasingly, lay ministers will be called to assist their local Priests in the several rites that celebrate the Church's faith and in the pastoral care of those who are dying and those who mourn.

In 1989 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference published a revised edition of the Rite of Funerals under the title Order of Christian Funerals (OCF).

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the General Introduction to the OCF and the Introductions to the three Rites within it: the **Vigil**, the **Funeral Liturgy** and the **Committal**. They are intended to assist Priests and Parish Funeral Ministers to celebrate the Funeral Rites of the Church. The term "Parish Funeral Minister" as used in these guidelines refers to those people who have (a) successfully completed the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle's **Parish Funeral Ministry Course**, and (b) have been commissioned by their Parish Priest to preside at Funeral Liturgies and the related Rites in their parishes.

In emphasising the role of the local parish community, these guidelines remind us that it **is the normal context** in which we pray for those who have died, comfort the living and give witness to our Christian hope in the resurrection (OCF 7.)

The assistance of the Archdiocese of Sydney through their document *Pastoral Notes for the Order of Christian Funerals and Interim Guidelines for Lay Ministers who Preside at Funerals*, 2000, is gratefully acknowledged.



+ Michael Malone

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Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle
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Order of Christian Funerals

Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers

The Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers may be celebrated between the time of death and the Funeral Liturgy. It offers an opportunity for the Christian community to gather to pray for the deceased and to support the family. It is often an opportunity for those who are unable to attend the funeral to pray with the family.

The Vigil is a flexible ritual that includes Introductory Rites, Liturgy of the Word, Intercessory Prayers and the sharing of memories (OCF 54f). If praying Decades of the Rosary as part of the ritual, it is recommended that each Mystery be preceded by the appropriate Scriptural text.

A Parish Funeral Minister or close friend of the deceased may preside at the Vigil service. The Rite may take place at the home of the deceased, a relative's home, the funeral home chapel, or in a Church (OCF64-68).

Funeral Liturgy

When one of its members dies, the Christian community gathers to say farewell with a Funeral Liturgy in the Parish church (OCF 154-157.) The Funeral Liturgy may take the form of a **Funeral Mass** or a **Funeral Liturgy outside Mass**.

When no Priest is available, a Parish Funeral Minister who has completed this diocese's Parish Funeral Ministry Course and has been delegated by the Parish Priest, may preside at a Funeral Liturgy outside Mass (OCF 177-182).

Rite of Committal

The Rite of Committal is the final act of the community in caring for the body of the deceased. It is usually celebrated at the graveside or in a crematorium chapel (OCF 204-206).

When the Priest who presides at the Funeral Mass is not able to celebrate the Rite of committal, it is recommended that a Parish Funeral Minister who participated in the Funeral Mass would lead the Rite of Committal (OCF 215).

A Parish Funeral Minister who presides at the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass would normally continue to the cemetery or crematorium to celebrate the Rite of Committal.

The Parish Funeral Minister may be called upon to lead a Rite of Committal with final commendation at a graveside or crematorium when there has been no previous Funeral Liturgy in a church. This is more likely to occur when the deceased or the deceased's family has no close links with a parish community.

At other times, the Parish Funeral Minister may be called upon to lead the Funeral Service for a person who, due to geographic, financial or other unusual circumstances, is not able to be returned to their own community for burial. The lack of any prior contact with the family is a major pastoral challenge that needs to be considered carefully by those who assist at such funerals.

Overall Pastoral Care

As well as presiding at Funeral Liturgies outside Mass and the related Rites, the Parish Funeral Minister plays a significant role in the overall pastoral care of the sick and dying and their families.

Ideally, as a member of a parish's grief and bereavement team (where these have been established) the Parish Funeral Minister should be involved in pastoral visits with the family before (when circumstances allow), and after the death. The Parish Funeral Minister can play a key role in offering pastoral care and assisting with the practical arrangements such as planning the funeral. Presiding at the funeral should take place within the context of a pastoral relationship with the family of the deceased.

Formation

Parish Funeral Ministers must have successfully completed the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle's **Parish Funeral Ministry Course**, and be commissioned by their parish Priest to preside at Funeral Liturgies and the related Rites.

The Parish Funeral Ministry Course provides ministers with knowledge and awareness of grief and its effects, an opportunity to explore their own experiences of grief, formation in pastoral ministry and instruction in the Order of Christian Funerals and the role of the presider.

Parish Funeral Ministers must be prepared to participate in ongoing formation and regular supervision.

Role Description for Parish Funeral Ministers who Preside

The Parish Priest, with the authority of the Bishop, may delegate to the Parish Funeral Ministers the ministry of presiding at the Vigil, Committal, and in exceptional circumstances, the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass.

Deputation may be for a limited but unspecified period, or for a fixed term, and only applies to the particular parish to which the Funeral Minister belongs.

Parish Funeral Ministers who preside at Funeral Liturgies give an instruction on the readings (OCF 27). Their ministry is, therefore, clearly related to the Word and assumes knowledge of the Scriptures and how they relate to the life of the deceased. An instruction during the Funeral Liturgy is not the occasion for expressing personal piety or vivid details of personal bereavement.

A Parish Funeral Minister who presides at funerals will be part of a parish bereavement team who offers pastoral care and assists with the preparation of the Funeral Rites. It is essential that ministers will have made prior contact with the bereaved before presiding at a Vigil or Committal.

Parish Funeral Ministers will dress formally, in a manner appropriate to the occasion, signifying their respect for the deceased person and the gathered assembly. Men should wear a suit and tie. Women should wear skirts or trousers with a jacket.

Financial Matters

All monies received by clergy or parish funeral ministers for funerals are to be forwarded to the parish office. At funerals conducted by Parish Funeral Ministers, the Clergy Fund Board has agreed that 50% of such monies will be paid into the Diocesan Clergy Fund and the other 50% may be put aside to assist the development of funeral ministry in the parish. This money may be used at the Parish Priest's discretion for resources, formation, travelling and other expenses.